THE END OF THE MUGABE ERA IN ZIMBABWE: CHANGE OR CONTINUITY?

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Introduction

Robert Mugabe’s long government, which began with Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980, came to an end, almost forty years later, in 2017. Mugabe’s downfall is symbolic: while it puts an end to one of the leading anti-colonial leaderships still in power in Southern Africa, it brings, especially in the view of Western countries, the end of an authoritarian regime and the possibility of democratizing reforms.

Zimbabwe has a history of crises and conflicts since its independence. The country’s socio-economic development indexes are among the lowest in the African Continent and its political conditions and institutions are often criticized. The country’s domestic context, however, is much more complex than the indicators show and it is strongly related to its external interactions.

The end of the Mugabe era brings to light the prospect of change, both political and economic. The end of a long government, as is the case in question, is a central moment in the understanding of the trajectory of a country, both from a historical point of view and as a possible turning point for the future path that will be taken. It should not be forgotten, however, that, despite the change in power, there is the maintenance of the party, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU-PF), which points to important traces of continuity.

The objective of this article is to, from a historical analysis, understand the possible factors that conditioned Mugabe’s retiring from the government and the possible changes in the political conditions of the country. It is assumed that the country’s external relations, combined with the internal...
disputes of ZANU-PF, were the decisive factors in the departure of Mugabe. The article is divided into three parts, in addition to this introduction and the concluding remarks. The first section will deal with the history of crises that the country has presented since its independence, especially the issues related to the elections and the confrontation between the government and the opposition forces. In the second part, the recent crisis, which culminated in Mugabe’s downfall, will be addressed. Finally, an analysis will be made of the more immediate effects of this change of power as well as the outlook for the country’s political conditions in the short term.

A history of crisis

Zimbabwe was one of the latest African countries to become independent, in 1980. In addition to being late, Zimbabwe’s independence, unlike other British colonies in the region, was conflictive and marked by a significant period of struggle between different groups. The context of colonization and decolonization experienced by the country had a significant influence on the emergence of most of the problems faced after independence.

In the words of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2002, 110):

The Zimbabwean post-colonial state was a product of particularly two recent major legacies. Firstly, it was a direct successor of the brutal and authoritarian settler colonial state. Secondly, it was the product of a protracted nationalist armed struggle. [...] The third element that determined the Peace and security perspectives of Zimbabwe was the geopolitical realities of the Southern African region.

The crisis in Zimbabwe began in the late 90s, with the establishment of an opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), consisting, essentially, of members of unions, urban workers and white farmers. The MDC comes as a response to ZANU-PF government’s decision to change the Constitution in order to keep Mugabe as head of state. According to Cawthra (2010), a referendum was held to decide on the change in the Constitution and it didn’t win. In the 2000 elections, as the MDC won seats

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2 Zimbabwe was a British Colony called Southern Rhodesia. In 1965, the white minority declared the country’s unilateral independence. What followed, until independence, in 1980, was a long period of confrontation between this white minority, united on the Rhodesian Front, and the nationalist liberation movements, the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) and its dissent, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), led by Mugabe.
in the legislative and decided to resume discussions about land, in order to regain the support of ZANU-PF’s traditional rural electorate, Mugabe lost much of his support (Alden 2010).

The 2000 elections were accompanied by external observation missions. While Commonwealth and European Union observers declared the election illegitimate, the Organization of African Unity and SADC missions, while acknowledging problems, found that they were insufficient to interfere with the final results (Minillo 2011).

This context of instability was marked by actions of ZANU-PF supporters, initially aimed at expelling commercial white farmers from their land, but it eventually evolved, as well, into the presidential race in 2002. It is important to point out, as Farley recalls (2008), that these violent acts were not suppressed by the government forces, instead, police forces were accomplices of the actions.

These actions were part of a larger context of violence and confrontations that preceded the 2002 presidential elections. The actions of the ZANU-PF supporter groups included not only violent demonstrations, but also a fraudulent voter registration process and even the assassination of opposition parties and their supporters. The conjuncture was, therefore, of great crisis, reflecting, in part, a historical problem, dating back to the period of decolonization, of economic power concentrated in a small white elite (Schutz 2014).

Unlike Western countries, Zimbabwe’s neighbors rarely offer public condemnation of the country’s internal problems or government policies. This is due, among other things, to historical and structural aspects. As Alden points out (2010), some states in the region, such as South Africa and Namibia, had a very similar socioeconomic and political structure to Zimbabwe, with a strong concentration of land ownership and almost no agrarian reform program implemented after the racial segregation regimes. South Africa’s stance, in particular, was rather hesitant. Thabo Mbeki, then president, adopted the strategy known as ‘quiet diplomacy’, which consisted in quietly advising Mugabe to undertake reforms, but, publicly, supporting his actions. For the other countries in the region, in turn, Mugabe’s position could be seen as a mobilization of “regional solidarity campaigns of the recent past” (Alden 2010, 5).

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3 According to Alden (2010), this position was justified in two aspects: the first was economic, since Zimbabwe was South Africa’s main trading partner on the Continent and economic sanctions would have a very large impact on South African companies. The second issue involved the regional effects that Mugabe’s conviction and possible withdrawal from power could generate, with a large influx of refugees and a destabilization of the region.
Likewise, the main regional institution, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), has always been hesitant in interfering with the crisis in Zimbabwe. Instead, SADC initially took a solidarity stand with the Zimbabwean government. This position was partially altered at the 2001 Summit Meeting, in which there was a declaration of concern about the crisis situation in Zimbabwe and its possible effects on the region. In addition, as Cawthra (2010) recalls, Mugabe was removed from the OPDS\(^4\) Summit Presidency.

In 2004, as Modeni (2014) points out, as a result of SADC recommendations on electoral processes\(^5\), two changes were made in Zimbabwe’s legislation. The first was the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission Act (ZEC), which created a specific commission to deal with electoral matters. The second was the Electoral Act, which replaced the old electoral legislation, with major changes. Noteworthy are: the polling taking place in a single day; counting votes in specific centers; and the creation of an Electoral Court.

The crisis in the country continued to deepen in the following years and, in 2008, at the African Union Summit, it was decided the SADC should formally act as mediator of the crisis in Zimbabwe. At the SADC Summit a few months later, the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, was appointed chief mediator. The appointment, according to Cawthra (2011), generated many criticisms, especially from MDC, which accused Mbeki of being pro-ZANU-PF.

South Africa’s mediation, which focused in the dialogue between the opposition and ZANU-PF, hoped to address a wide range of issues, but led to limited results. As Matlosa (2009) points out, minor changes have been suggested in some legislations dealing with elections or related topics, such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act; all involved the need of changes in the Constitution.

In 2008, new presidential elections took place. The first turn occurred without major intercurrences. Between the first and second rounds, however, a number of violent actions were committed by ZANU-PF members and their supporters, against the MDC, culminating in the withdrawal of the

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\(^4\) Organ for Politics, Defense and Security.

\(^5\) In 2004, the organization released a document entitled SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. In addition to specifically naming the principles that member countries must follow in the conduct of democratic elections, the document also addresses Electoral Observation Missions. The conduction of Electoral Observation Missions and the changes in the political context of the region led to the need to revise the principles agreed upon in 2004. Thus, in 2015, a revision of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections was published.
opposition candidate (Mutisi 2015). In addition, the MDC opposed holding the elections before the changes proposed by SADC mediation and the revision of the Constitution took place. The second round, of course, led to the victory of ZANU-PF. The SADC Electoral Observation Mission indicated that the elections were not free and did not reflect the will of the people of Zimbabwe. Other organizations and states also condemned what happened in the country, intensifying the crisis.

As an attempt to solve the crisis, less than a month after the elections, MDC and ZANU-PF signed a Memorandum of Understanding, creating a power-sharing government. The outcome of this document was what became known as the Global Political Agreement (GPA). The GPA, which was signed still in 2008, would only have an implementation plan in 2010.

A turning point in SADC’s stance would be the 2009 Extraordinary Summit, which gave Mugabe time to make reforms in order to hold free and fair elections and to implement the GPA. In practice, however, the change of position did not yield many results, with small concessions from the Mugabe government. It should be noted, however, that, coupled with the GPA, a process of revision and adaptation of legislation began, culminating, in 2013, in the promulgation of a new Constitution (Chirambo and Motsamai 2016).

The proposal for the new Constitution was presented, in 2012, by a Parliamentary Committee. The changes included greater limits to the power of the President and greater independence of the Executive and Legislative branches (Modeni 2014). After a referendum, it was, as already mentioned, enacted in 2013.

In 2013, new elections were held, keeping Mugabe and ZANU-PF in power and ending the government coalition that had been established in 2009 (BTI 2016). MDC leaders once again challenged the results and called for new elections, even though the SADC Observation Mission recognized the elections as legitimate. Clashes between the opposition and government forces continued to take place throughout 2014, aggravated by ZANU-PF’s announcement that Mugabe would once again be a candidate in the 2018 elections (International Crisis Group 2016).

The crisis in the country continued to develop with violent actions from all sides and even internal disputes in both the opposition and the government. Reflecting these disputes, a new party was created in 2015, People First, the result of a split within ZANU-PF. One of the main issues of disagreement was the possibility of the First Lady, Grace Mugabe, taking place as presidential candidate instead of her husband.
It is important to note, however, that Zimbabwe had shown signs of a gradual improvement in political conditions since 2016, according to Freedom House data. The organization’s reports for 2016 and 2017 showed that both indicators of civil liberties and political rights followed an improving trend. Its index had gone from six to five, thus migrating from non-free to partially free classification. The 2017 report, however, already indicated that, as early as 2016, succession issues were creating conflict and confrontation within ZANU-PF itself. The Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA), Mugabe’s historical ally, withdrew its support for the President, accusing him of being dictatorial and blaming Grace for the country’s conflicts (FH 2017).

The fall of Mugabe

The crisis in Zimbabwe gradually became a crisis of leadership for Mugabe. The inner divisions of the party began to accentuate with the matter of the succession. As early as mid-2017, rumors began that Vice-President Mnangagwa would leave the government. Mnangagwa’s departure would be a reflection of the division of ZANU-PF into two groups: Team Lacoste, which defended Mnangagwa as Mugabe’s successor in the upcoming elections; and Generation 40, which would not have a candidate for succession, but would be strong supporters of Grace Mugabe (Africa Confidential 2017).

Throughout the year, tensions within the administration increased, given the proximity of the following elections, expected to take place in 2018, and Mugabe’s unlikely continuity in power. The economic crisis, which was not new, was accentuated and used by Mugabe’s opponents within the party as a justification for the supposed renewal.

It is important to note that Mugabe was facing problems in his relations with the military. To a large extent, the military was also displeased

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6 Freedom House is an organization that carries out an annual monitoring of the political conditions of the countries in the world, producing a report and pointing out possible trends. It uses indicators of civil liberties and political rights, generating an index ranging from one to seven, one being totally free and seven non-free. According to Freedom House’s classification, a free country is one in which there is open political competition, respect for civil liberties, independent civic life, and independent media. In partially free countries, respect for civil liberties and political rights is limited; there is often an environment of corruption and/or ethnic and religious conflict, with a weak rule of law. In addition, there is a political scenario in which a party enjoys domination, despite a degree of political pluralism. Finally, non-free countries suffer from the absence of basic political rights and civil liberties.

7 The name is because of Mnangagwa’s nickname, Crocodile.
with the position of Grace Mugabe and her eventual path to her husband’s succession. Likewise, the Zimbabwean intelligence agency was also internally divided between supporters of a possible succession by Grace Mugabe and those who supported General Chiwenga as a strong government official and Mugabe’s natural successor (Cropley 2017).

In early November, moves for the withdrawal of Mugabe from administration became more evident. General Chiwenga, then Commander of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces, travelled to China to meet the Chinese Defense Minister. The visit aimed to seek support for the takeover and Mugabe’s deposition, on the grounds that a party group, supporter of Grace Mugabe, was planning actions to destabilize the armed forces (Africa Confidential 2017b).

Concurrently to Chiwenga’s trip, Mugabe disagreed with Mnangagwa, accusing him of provoking divisions in the party. Tensions between Mugabe and Mnangagwa widened, culminating in Mnangagwa’s withdrawal from the Vice-Presidency on November 6th. Mugabe stated that the vice-president was taking a disloyal conduct and therefore could not continue in his government.

Mnangagwa’s departure from the government was the starting point of a series of events that, in a few days, culminated in Mugabe’s downfall. On the one hand, Mugabe fired ministers close to Mnangagwa and threatened Chiwenga of prison when he returned to Zimbabwe. The opposition, in turn, continued to articulate for Mugabe’s deposition, including through public statements, such as that of Mnangagwa after his departure (Africa Confidential 2017b).

When he returned to national territory, Chiwenga blamed the party for the country’s economic problems and stated that the party’s problem were in the posture and actions of members who had not been in the war of liberation, in a clear reference to Generation 40, group supporting Grace Mugabe. At that moment, rumors began that Mugabe was trapped in his house.

On November 15th, General Sibusiso Moyo made a statement saying that Mugabe and his family were safe and well, and that the actions carried out by the country’s military were only aimed at arresting the criminals who were supposedly surrounding the President’s family and re-establishing order in the country. As of that day, the country would be under the government of the deposed vice-president, Mnangagwa.

Thus, a short period of transition and uncertainty began. For about a week, information on the crisis in Zimbabwe did not indicate a definitive resolution. Mugabe’s condition and posture were still unclear, and, although the moves indicated a possible waiver, there were no official statements. Simultaneously, popular demonstrations called for the resignation of the
President. And ZANU-PF members linked to Generation 40, including Grace Mugabe, were expelled from the party (International Crisis Group 2017).

On November 24th, after Mugabe’s resignation, Mnangagwa officially took over the presidency of the country. Still in 2017, Chiwenga left the leadership of the military and became vice-president. Zimbabwe, thus, began 2018 with a new government and promises of change and reform.

The new government was quickly accepted as legitimate by other states, including the African neighbors. It is noteworthy that SADC (2017b), whose own formation is strongly linked to the figure of Mugabe, recognized the new government in an official communique:

The Secretariat of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) congratulates His Excellency, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, on his swearing in as President of the Republic of Zimbabwe. [...] Today’s inauguration is significant for the people of Zimbabwe. SADC welcomes the reassuring message President Mnangagwa delivered to Zimbabweans on his arrival in Zimbabwe on 22 November 2017, in which he promised to lead the nation into a ‘new and unfolding democracy’, underscoring the need for unity among all Zimbabweans in growing the economy and ensuring peace and prosperity in their country.

On the other hand, on the same day, SADC (2017a) also launched a statement praising Mugabe “as a true champion of Pan-Africanism, and in the promotion of regional co-operation, development and integration” and recognizing as a right decision his resignation and withdrawal from power. It is clear, therefore, that if he tried to resist, Mugabe probably would not find support among his neighbors.

Mugabe’s departure from power was met with great euphoria by the international community, especially by Western countries. The end of the Mugabe era is expected to bring changes in the country’s politics and economy. The changes in leadership, however, do not seem to indicate actual major changes in the country’s political condition. It must be reminded that, although Mugabe has been removed from power, ZANU-PF remains the party in government. In addition, the new government took no action indicating any profound change in the way the country is run.

Some actors played a central role in the articulations that would lead to Mugabe’s deposition. Mutsvangwa, an ally of Mnangagwa, allegedly articulated

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8 It should be noted that when Mugabe resigned, the impeachment process was already being addressed by ZANU-PF itself, in agreement with the MDC.
the change in power, both leading Mugabe to relent and rehabilitating the image of the armed forces in the country (Africa Confidential 2017c). In return, he would gain a position in the new government. His wife, Monica Mutsangwa has already taken over the chair of the party’s Women’s League, which was formerly Grace Mugabe’s.

The main figure in this transition of power, however, was Chiwenga, who articulated ‘Operation Restore Legacy’ for the seizure of power. Chiwenga fulfilled the role of mediator with external forces, securing the support of one of Zimbabwe’s main political and economic partners, China. In addition, he mobilized the military forces so that Mugabe’s withdrawal could take place.

On an official visit to Mozambique in January 2018, Mnangagwa announced that elections would take place in 4 or 5 months. The President confirmed that Commonwealth observers will be invited, along with UN observers, to follow the electoral process. The announcement of the elections, at first, adds to the idea that this would just be a transitional government until the elections.

As mentioned earlier, the elections are scheduled for August 2018. In addition to ZANU-PF and MDC, main opposition party, two other parties are expected to compete: one led by ZANU-PF’s former vice-president, Joice Mujuru; and the other a MDC dissident, led by Elton Mangoma (Africa Confidential 2017c). The undertaking of the elections, however, although already announced by the president, is still nebulous. This is due to the country’s own history of political instability and the absence of independent and reliable institutions.

According to Fabricius (2018), Mnangagwa and ZANU-PF would probably win the elections, given the political capital gained from the seizure of power and the opposition’s own division, with the weakening of the MDC. Added to that is the death of Tsvangirai, MDC’s top leadership and the party’s likely presidential candidate.

Mnangagwa, however, is not unanimous, neither in the country nor in ZANU-PF. It must be reminded that the Generation 40 group remains a point of support for Grace Mugabe, opposed to Mnangagwa’s presidency. In some provinces, in which the Generation 40 has greater insertion, the figure of Mnangagwa is not well accepted. On the other hand, Mnangagwa is supposed to have the support of England. Even though it denies this support officially, the British diplomatic body made visits to Mnangagwa and there are already signs that Zimbabwe would be accepted back into the Commonwealth9 (Fabricius 2018). The return to the Commonwealth would be conditional upon

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9 The country is indefinitely suspended from the Commonwealth since the 2002 elections, considered illegitimate.
the government accepting an election observation mission, which would, in the eyes of the West, ensure greater credibility to the elections than just an African Union mission. This explains Mnangagwa’s statement when he visited Mozambique.

The very context in which Mnangagwa ascended to power adds to these questions. Despite the acceptance of the other countries and the resignation of Mugabe, the process can also be understood as a coup, articulated by the military and with external support, for the overthrow of Mugabe. Aiming, among other things, to get rid of this image, Mnangagwa has maintained a friendly relationship with Mugabe, even making complimentary public statements.

According to Matyszak (2018), Mnangagwa would defend the narrative of ‘military-assisted transition’, in which the target was not Mugabe, but the criminals who surrounded him, including his wife, Grace. Mnangagwa’s aim would not only be to maintain a good image for ZANU-PF voters, but also to avoid condemnation of neighbors and regional organizations, especially SADC and the African Union.

Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe

Mugabe’s withdrawal from power, after 37 years in Zimbabwe’s government, is undoubtedly a major change. The Mugabe figure represents a generation of leaders who fought against the colonial presence in Africa and against the apartheid regime in South Africa. During the 1980s, he was the great leadership of Southern Africa, a position which, since the 90s, after the end of apartheid, began to be disputed by Mandela. The long history of economic crisis has not prevented Mugabe from continuing to defend his position as the region’s legitimate leader and even calling on that historic role as a means of maintaining the support of his neighbors and avoiding public condemnation of his actions.

The implementation of major changes is not the general expectation. In the words of Southall (2017, 83):

Certainly, Zimbabweans had few illusions that Mnangagwa was intent on launching a transition to democracy, although many had hopes that he would drive sufficient reforms to render life more tolerable than it had been during the last days of Mugabe.

The very fulfilment of elections would be a factor of skepticism among the population of Zimbabwe. While a part of the population recognizes the
importance of the election as a form of legitimization of the mandate, another portion believes that, without the necessary reforms in the legislation, the elections would bring no significant change in the conditions of the country (International Crisis Group 2017).

The figure of Mnangagwa, as mentioned earlier, also does not bring high hopes of changes in the country’s leadership. As Southall (2017) points out, Mnangagwa, one of the ZANU-PF’s armed wing leaders before independence, was one of the main idealizers of the security state implemented in Zimbabwe. He was the one who commanded the acts of violence and persecution against the opposition in the 2008 elections. It should be noted that before assuming the Vice-Presidency, Mnangagwa was Minister of Defense.

A first indication that Mnangagwa will not carry out significant reforms is the composition of his cabinet. All nominees are members of ZANU-PF; some, even, held positions during the governments of Mugabe. Of note is the appointment of General Moyo as Foreign Minister, one of the first to give public statements supporting military action for the withdrawal of Mugabe. In addition, Mugabe’s own withdrawal of power can be understood as a strategy for maintaining the country’s structure and conduct, given that Grace Mugabe’s influence was not well seen by the party’s traditional leadership. Her influence on Mugabe, therefore, would mean an unwanted change (Melber 2017).

For Southall (2017), the cabinet formed by Mnangagwa, rather than indicating continuity, evidences the influence of the military forces on the process and indicates that they will remain present in the government. It should be noted that, besides the indications to the cabinet previously mentioned, the Vice-Presidency was occupied by Chiwenga, confirming this influence.

From an economic point of view, it is possible that some changes, however small, will be made. Obviously, it is not possible to separate the economic sphere from the political sphere and the possible progress Mnangagwa can make economically, especially through external resources, depend on a good progress of this political transition. The starting point should be the holding of elections, free and recognized as such by international observers, still in 2018.

The problem lies in the actions required for elections to occur within acceptable standards. Some minimal reforms that should take place are: measures to ensure the credibility of the voters list, independence of the Electoral Commission and the elimination of the Executive’s power to veto observers of the Electoral Observation Missions (International Crisis Group.
It is likely, however, that a majority of Mnangagwa’s cabinet members will be against such reforms.

The holding of elections, without Mugabe and with possible reforms in the legislation, puts a spotlight on the forces of opposition. The main opposition group, the MDC, is facing internal disputes after Tsvangirai’s death. In addition, there are dissident groups, which fragment the opposition, making the way easier for ZANU-PF.

External influences should also be considered in the context of Zimbabwe’s crisis. It is important to note that China denies any involvement in the process leading to Mugabe’s withdrawal from power. There are no formal statements from any country admitting knowledge of what was being planned in Zimbabwe. In any case, the absence of mentions or accusations of coup in the official announcements of the countries indicates that, possibly, neighboring countries and China itself already had information on the situation and, to some extent, understood Mugabe’s departure as acceptable.

China’s relationship with Zimbabwe is historic and dates back from before the country’s independence, when China supported the liberation movement led by Mugabe. The proximity between Harare and Beijing has thrived over the years. Currently, China is the main foreign investor in the country, with investments in several areas, especially infrastructure and natural resources (Nunoo 2017). In addition, Zimbabwe is China’s second largest trading partner in the African continent in absolute terms, only behind South Africa (Hogwe and Banda 2017).

One cannot forget that one of the foundational stones of Chinese foreign policy is non-interference in other countries’ domestic affairs. It is this principle that underlies China’s relationship with several African countries suffering sanctions from Western countries. One of the main characteristics of China-Africa relations is not to condition economic relations to demands for political change. The exception is the One China policy, namely the need to recognize Taiwan as part of China and not as an independent territory.

This Chinese position, in the case of Zimbabwe, indicates two important conclusions. The first is that it is highly unlikely that Beijing will make any official statement on possible support for the process that removed Mugabe from power. Although China was aware of what would happen,
bearing in mind the visit of Chiwenga a few days before the beginning of the crisis, this fact will not have official confirmation. The second conclusion is that, regardless of who is in power or any changes that may be implemented by Mnangagwa, relations between China and Zimbabwe should remain unchanged.

From the regional point of view, it is important to highlight the position of South Africa. South Africa, as mentioned, acted as a mediator, indicated by SADC, in the previous crises of Zimbabwe. Its performance was marked by a rather hesitant stance, with no public condemnation of the Mugabe government and a quieter action. The reaction of Pretoria to Mugabe’s departure from power did not change this history. Accompanying the position of the SADC and the African Union, the South African government recognized as legitimate the transition process led by the military and the new Mnangagwa government. It should be noted that at that time the African National Congress was also experiencing a period of tension, with internal divisions and succession problems that would culminate in the resignation of Jacob Zuma.

Final Remarks

Many African countries are marked by long-term governments of a single leader, as was the case in Angola and Zimbabwe. The impact of this absence of alternation in power is notorious, with clear restrictions on democratic freedoms and frequent internal conflicts. The departure of a ruler from power, however, does not necessarily mean change in the conduct of government. The end of the Mugabe era in Zimbabwe was not the end of the ZANU-PF era.

The fact that the government was taken over by the former vice-president, who also formed a Cabinet with members from the Mugabe government, is an important indication that Zimbabwe’s leadership change is unlikely to bring about major changes for the country. ZANU-PF remains in power and with it the vast majority of those who have led the policies of the Mugabe government. Mugabe’s own withdrawal of power, led by the military, was orchestrated to keep the traditional forces in power and prevent a possible rise to power of the group led by Grace Mugabe.

The stance of neighboring countries confirms the view that Zimbabwe’s institutional conditions will most likely be maintained, at least in the short term. Both South Africa, one of the main leaders in the region, and the regional organizations directly involved – SADC and the African
Union – quickly recognized the new government as legitimate. Such a position indicates not only the acceptance of the process that culminated in Mugabe’s resignation, but also the understanding that there is no major break going on, whether positive or not. It is important to remember that South Africa itself is also facing a situation of instability, although there are no indications of institutional problems, with the resignation of Jacob Zuma, after the pressures of the African National Congress.

Thus, despite Western pressures for democratizing reforms in Zimbabwe, especially with regard to electoral legislation, there is no indication that such changes will actually take place. Even if the 2018 elections are confirmed, which is likely to happen, they should not guarantee change. It is important to remember that elections have always been held in the country, although they have often not been recognized as legitimate by external observers. The 2018 election should take place in a context of the strengthening of ZANU-PF by recent events and, once again, fragmentation and weakening of the opposition, with the divisions of the MDC and Tsvangirai’s death. The end of the Mugabe era, thus, does not end the control of the former forces in power.

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ABSTRACT

In November 2017, after 37 years, Robert Mugabe’s government ended in Zimbabwe. This change in power is a milestone in the history of the country and of the African continent as a whole. The aim of the present article is to analyze the factors that conditioned Mugabe’s fall from power as well as possible changes in the country’s political context. It is assumed that the country’s external relations, combined with the internal divisions of the party, have conditioned the crisis that culminated in the end of Mugabe’s rule. The stance of non-interference in domestic affairs of its African neighbors and Zimbabwe’s main economic partner, China, had enabled Mugabe to remain in power for nearly four decades, but also allowed that the transition to Mnangagwa, assisted by the military, occurred without major intercurrences. ZANU-PF’s internal disputes, fueled by the increasing need for Mugabe to indicate a successor, gradually weakened Mugabe’s power and created new alliances. The change in the leading figure of the country, however, does not seem to indicate significant changes in the political conditions of the country, although some changes in the conduct of the economy might occur.

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